Grandpa—The Real Santa Claus

Firecrackers at Christmas

By ROBERTUS LOVE

WHEN I was a boy—and that was some time ago, kind and considerate reader—I never popped firecrackers on the Fourth of July. I popped them on Christmas day. That was because I was a boy in a southern state only a few years after the close of the civil war. Still you don't understand? Well, let me do a little explaining.

I shall not venture to speak for other communities in the south, but in my neighborhood most of the people still were somewhat bitter against Uncle Sam for having come down there with armies for a four years' fight. The folks in and around my serene and sequestered little village, lying on the cedar clad hillsides of southeast Missouri, had known much of the war from actual observation and experience. Armies, Federal and Confederate, had marched and countermarched through the village. A remarkable battle, that of Pilot Knob, was fought less than twenty miles away. Missouri, let it be remembered, was loyal to the Union, but in the southern part particularly the sentiment was mostly in favor of the "lost cause."

We small boys did not know that the reason for the firecrackerless Fourth and the firecrackery Christmas lay in the prejudices engendered by the war. All we knew or cared to know was that when Christmas came around it meant a few bunches of firecrackers and a lot of fun popping them out in the snow, for in those days we always had a white Christmas.

After the lapse of thirty years I can recall with vivid distinctness a certain Christmas in my town which began with high anticipation of fun and came very near ending in a tragedy. Our family doctor had three boys who were favorite chums of my brother and myself. Somehow we always managed to get together on Christmas day and pop the firecrackers which Santa Claus brought or which we bought with the paper quarter of a dollar allowed each of us out of the family exchequer for that purpose. A quarter bought three bunches of the little red firecrackers. There were five boys, and you can compute the number of bunches we had.

We all got up early on this Christmas morning, took the candies and oranges and other things from our stockings, inspected the "U. S. Mail" wagon left at the fireside, pulled the trigger of the new toy pistol—and then went down to old man Bean's store and spent our quarters to best advantage.

Brother and I went over to the doctor's house and joined his boys in the front yard. The snow was about ankle deep, crinkly under the foot, and the air was crisp and clear. The eldest of the doctor's boys had been presented with a new derby hat for Christmas—the first derby that ever came to Irondale. There—I just had to let the name of the town slip out.

Clainie—that was what we called the biggest boy—was intensely proud of that new hat. He wore it at breakfast that morning, his brothers said. When we all gathered in the yard to pop the crackers his derby was on the back of his head. We pooled our property by putting the fifteen bunches of firecrackers in a heap on the snow. Near at hand lay a piece of punk, burning slowly.

Just to see if we had a hatful of firecrackers Clainie put his prized derby over the heap. Some of the crackers stuck out at one side. The littlest boy—dead many years now—picked off one of the crackers, touched it to the punk, and when it spluttered fire he dropped it. The cracker went under one side of the hat. That was the point where the frolic became a tragedy.

All of us were discussing the problem of firing a whole bunch of crackers at once when suddenly there was a ripping explosion which drew our attention to Clainie's derby. The hat was considerably divided against itself. One powdery piece of it struck me on the nose. The rim, a ragged ruin, flew over the fence into the street. The rest of it disappeared at various places in the snow.

To paraphrase the line from the poem of the boy who stood on the burning deck, "The hat—oh, where was it?"

Clainie's grief was twofold. He had lost his new hat, and all the firecrackers had gone up in one big explosion. All of us were disconsolate. But the dear old doctor—I think he is living yet and very old now—took pity on us and gave each of us a dime wherewith to purchase a bunch apiece.

Down there nowadays they pop firecrackers on the Fourth, but I dare say that some of the boys of this generation still find a bunch of the little red poppers in their stockings on Christmas morning.

The Little Boy Who Moved.

The fairies missed him when they came
To play their evening game
They searched the old red farmhouse through.
They called aloud his name.
They even looked inside the barn,
But vain their questing proved,
So they made up their elfin minds
The little boy had moved.
Kriss Kringle missed him when he came
Upon his reindeer ride.
He hunted for him high and low,
But not a trace he spied.
But still he keeps a lookout sharp
To find him if he can—
The little boy who went one day
To live inside a man.

—McLandburgh Wilson in Judge.